



GOING HUNGRY

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

📌 *“COVID-19 is potentially catastrophic for millions who are already hanging by a thread. It is a hammer blow for millions more who can only eat if they earn a wage.”*
Arif Husain, chief economist, World Food Programme.¹

On 21 April 2020, the World Food Programme warned that, unless swift action is taken, some 265 million people worldwide, double the numbers from the previous year, face acute food shortages.² This, in a world where some 144 million children under 5 years are already malnourished, 47 million of them acutely so.³

On top of long-running poverty and malnutrition, in 2019, a record 51 million people are estimated to have been driven from their homes by conflict and disasters, just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.⁴ These multiple crises combine with lethal consequences and, in families already struggling to survive, it is girls and young women who are the hardest hit.

Bearing the brunt of Covid-19

“My fear with this virus in Liberia is that women will really suffer. We will suffer over food. Men will abuse us. Because if I don't have food and a boy has food, if I ask him for help, he will ask me for sex before he gives me some. This is the suffering I am talking about.” Janet, 14, Liberia



Sirri, 12, now has to do more housework since her school in Cameroon closed © Plan International

ECONOMIC CRISIS

Girls and women across the world work on family farms and earn money with jobs in food preparation, beauty salons and local trading which become impossible with social distancing in place. This lack of an income means they are unable to buy basic necessities. When families run drastically short of food adolescent girls are often sexually exploited and forced into risky behaviour to help put food on the table.⁵

EDUCATION

Some 743 million girls⁶ are now out of school and even when schools reopen, many girls and young women may find it hard to return. Teenage pregnancies often increase in times of crisis and for these young women a return to education is even less likely.⁷

The suspension of school lunch programmes, affecting 370 million children worldwide, has increased hunger for many families.⁸

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Girls and women are most likely to suffer abuse and violence at home when the protective umbrellas of education and care systems are removed. All over the world reports of domestic violence are on the rise.

MALNUTRITION

In early childhood, boys and girls are equally likely to be malnourished but, as they approach adolescence, the impact of malnutrition is more severe for girls and young women who are far more likely to suffer from anaemia.⁹ This can have deadly consequences, especially in pregnancy.

CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

In a public health crisis such as COVID-19, girls and women bear the added burdens of domestic work and care, including looking after sick family members which in turn puts their own health at greater risk. Additionally, older girls may go hungry, as younger siblings eat first.¹⁰

“COVID-19 is set to radically exacerbate food insecurity in Africa... Millions of people in the region are at risk of not getting the food they need due to coronavirus disruptions.” World Economic Forum¹¹

FOCUS:

MOZAMBIQUE AND ZIMBABWE

Plan International is particularly concerned about the immediate and longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on adolescent girls across Mozambique. Assessments conducted shortly before COVID-19 hit showed that girls and young women were already bearing much of the brunt of weather and economic disasters.¹²

A state of emergency has been in place since 1 April. All schools are closed and public gatherings have been limited. Travel restrictions and labour shortages threaten food supplies. Food insecurity and growing hunger are likely to result in increased levels of child marriage, child labour, sexual exploitation and teenage pregnancy.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, humanitarian needs in Mozambique outstripped available funding. Nearly 43% of children under 5 are undernourished and 51% of girls and women 15-59 years are estimated to be anaemic.¹³ The response to the spread of COVID-19 will restrict resources available for vital services for girls and women: including those to combat gender-based violence and to promote sexual and reproductive health.

In neighbouring Zimbabwe there is a similar multi-layered crisis: the result of drought, the devastating impact of Cyclone Idai and a challenging political and macroeconomic environment characterised by hyper-inflation, shortages of food and medicine, and very low incomes. An estimated 2.2 million people in urban areas alone are facing food and economic insecurity. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, a quarter of young children suffered from malnutrition and a third of women and older girls were anaemic.¹⁴

Schools and markets were closed at the end of March. Escalating food insecurity has led adolescent girls into adopting negative coping strategies, as they are forced into sex or exploitative labour as a means of securing their next meal.

“My wish is to go back to school to get an education so I can either get a job or learn skills that will give me a means of livelihood to feed, clothe and raise my child and sibling well.” Cynthia, 18, Zimbabwe



Above: Deolinda, 19, takes home her hygiene kit provided by Plan International, Mozambique © Plan International



Calls for **URGENT ACTION**

The dual threats of virus and hunger will require an integrated and closely coordinated response from donors, governments and all humanitarian actors. This response must include an awareness of the diverse and particular effects of intersecting crises on girls and women.

Plan International calls on partners to support girls and young women – listening to and acting on the experiences they share and the suggestions they make – to help ensure that the current crisis does not have far-reaching, indelible impacts on their lives.

DONORS

- ▶ Ensure continued flexible funding for existing humanitarian programmes in conflict-affected, disaster-hit and fragile contexts; simplify procedures to enable humanitarian organisations to adapt to the rapidly-shifting context of the COVID-19 pandemic, without compromising staff safety.
- ▶ Urgently provide new funding to save lives and livelihoods among hard-hit populations, including refugees. Funding must be gender-responsive and comprehensive, encompassing nutrition and income support, water and sanitation, child protection, essential health supplies, education and accessible information about sexual and reproductive health and rights and the pandemic, in order to protect girls' immediate and longer-term interests.

GOVERNMENTS

- ▶ Secure the safe operation of food supply chains and essential services, including food processing, transport and local markets, in order to stabilise food systems and prices, and ensure the safety of all food sector workers.
- ▶ Expand gender-responsive, unconditional social protection and income support measures for the most affected and vulnerable people, with donor support where necessary, up to around 10% of GDP for the duration of the crisis.¹⁵ Use practical mechanisms – direct cash transfers linked to family size, nutrient-rich rations, socially-distanced school feeding – to provide essential assistance to families facing hunger, help keep local markets functioning, and support small businesses to recover.
- ▶ Design and scale up essential services to reach all girls and women in the most affected communities, including maternal and young child health, sexual and reproductive health information and services, clean water and safe sanitation, and accessible information about the pandemic. These vital services should be free to access and use.

- ▶ Prioritise girls' and young women's sexual and reproductive health and rights as lifesaving: this includes the implementation of the Minimum Initial Service Package for Reproductive Health in Crises.¹⁶
- ▶ Include measures which prevent and respond to gender-based violence as essential services and continue to fund them throughout. These must be accessible to all girls and women, including provision online and through mobile phones.
- ▶ Move towards allowing food markets, trading and business to resume, balancing the health risks of the pandemic against the threats of hunger and devastating nutritional and economic damage to poor families and children. In doing so, consider the protection needs of vulnerable groups stemming from both COVID-19 and response measures.

ALL HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

- ▶ Help make gender-disaggregated data available, analysed and actioned: all crisis data should be disaggregated by sex, age and disability, and include measures of gender equality. Monitoring for those children, particularly girls, who are most vulnerable to hunger, exploitation, violence and neglect, should be stepped up.
- ▶ Consult girls and young women, especially those most vulnerable, during all stages of the crisis: girls should be supported to express their experiences of the pandemic and the impact on them of movement restrictions, school and market closures and reduced access to critical services.

“I am a student, but the school is closed. I used to help my mom, she sells food but she is not selling much food right now due to the hygiene measures. This is going to be difficult. For me COVID-19 means unemployment.” *Linguere, 20, Senegal*

ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://www.wfp.org/news/covid-19-will-double-number-people-facing-food-crises-unless-swift-action-taken>
- 2 <https://www.wfp.org/news/covid-19-will-double-number-people-facing-food-crises-unless-swift-action-taken>
- 3 See UNICEF, WHO, World Bank Group, Levels and Trends in Child Malnutrition, 2020 Edition
- 4 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Norwegian Refugee Council <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2020/>
- 5 Plan International, Living Under Lockdown: Girls and CoVID-19, April 2020 <https://plan-international.org/publications/living-under-lockdown>
- 6 Albrechtsen, A.B. and Giannini, S. (2020) 'COVID-19 school closures around the world will hit girls hardest', UNESCO, 31 March. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/news/covid-19-school-closures-around-world-will-hit-girls-hardest> (Accessed: 24 April 2020).
- 7 Plan International, *Living Under Lockdown: Girls and COVID-19*, April 2020 <https://plan-international.org/publications/living-under-lockdown>
- 8 <https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/school-feeding-map/index.html>
- 9 See https://www.who.int/vmnis/anaemia/prevalence/summary/anaemia_data_status_t2/en/
- 10 <https://plan-international.org/publications/adolescent-girls-crisis>
- 11 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/africa-coronavirus-covid19-imports-exports-food-supply-chains>
- 12 Plan International, Rapid Gender Analysis, Food Crisis, Mozambique, November 2019
- 13 Global Network against Food Crises/Food Security Information Network, Global Report on Food Crises, April 2020
- 14 Global Report on Food Crises, op.cit.
- 15 See discussion in https://blogs.worldbank.org/impac/evaluations/what-can-low-income-countries-do-provide-relief-poor-and-vulnerable-during-covid?CID=WBW_AL_BlogNotification_EN_EXT
- 16 <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/what-minimum-initial-service-package>